

*Forging New Paths: Feminist Social Methodology and Rural Women in Java.* By Jutta Berninghausen and Brigit Kerstan. London: Zed Books, 1992. Pp. iv, 289.

This book aims to highlight the significance of women's self-help organizations and co-operation within the context of the Indonesian non-governmental organization (NGO) movement. As an opening gambit, the authors pose a number of questions, namely: whether a positive change in the economic position of women would result in a rise of their social status; whether an improvement in women's bargaining power would automatically lead to more influence within the family; and finally what effect these changes have on their role in the community.

*Forging New Paths* is divided into three major sections, and consists of eleven chapters. The first, comprising only one chapter (Chapter 1), gives us an account of the conceptual, methodological, and empirical basis of the study; the second, consisting of five chapters (Chapters 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6), examines the economic and social position of women in Java as a whole, and in the area of study in particular; and the final section, which has five chapters (Chapters 7, 8, 9, 10, and the conclusion in Chapter 11) focuses on the NGOs studied, their conceptual orientation, and performance.

The first section of *Forging New Paths* sets the framework and tone of the book; the study, as the authors claim, seeks to combine both sociological and anthropological methodological approaches. Data presented is based upon a case-study of sixty households in Gentuk, a village settlement in the sub-district of Karangarom, near the small town of Klaten in the Central Java lowlands. The choice of the geographical area is justified; the region is one of the most densely populated areas on the island and unemployment is high since the income potential in agriculture has been largely exhausted. Non-agricultural areas of employment, such as small crafts and industry, are also relatively poorly developed. The book's conceptual orientation and methodological approach is somewhat new in the context of Southeast Asian ethnography.

Part Two of the book highlights Javanese women's social and economic positions, as well as their marriage and family lives. The central

argument and conclusion offered by the authors is that the status of Javanese women in society is a function of the level of education received: low education results in low status. This, in turn, affects women's economic potential and their position in society. Although women in Gentuk believe that they should work to contribute to the family income, yet with their low educational attainment, they could only be employed mainly as agricultural labourers, earning relatively low income. The data presented in the study shows that women have very little access to high-income employment owing to their low-level education, and this encourages them to marry early (at the age of between thirteen and sixteen years). Overall, such a situation not only affects the status of women, but also limits their sphere of activities both in social and economic terms.

The final part of the book focuses on the Indonesian NGO movement, particularly its history and organizational networks, as well as its performance. The study presents a comparative analysis of two NGOs in the area studied, namely PUSAKOWANJATI (Eastern Javanese Women's Cooperatives) and PWP (Programme for the Productive Women sponsored by the LP3ES, that is, the Institute for Economic and Social Studies, Education and Information). Their conceptual orientation and methods of operations are examined and analysed. The authors conclude that Javanese self-help projects have not been fully developed, thus limiting the expansion of women's activities. The projects' dependence on external support, both in material and non-material forms, further hamper women's efforts at self-improvement, as individuals or as a group.

On the whole, *Forging New Paths* provides a rich and detailed description of rural women in Java and highlights their predicament in attempts to improve themselves. The authors' commitment to a study employing feminist research methods is proven worthy. The book also demonstrates that non-feminist methods normally fail to take into account the variations in living conditions among women and the work they do. However, the authors admit that such a method has its limitation; for example, in the case of marital relations, the authors found that because they interviewed only women, the data given conveyed a

somewhat one-sided view of infidelity. Respondents tend to accuse their husbands of infidelity, but do not really explain how they have contributed to the problem. The writers lived in the Gentuk area for over a year, were directly involved in the day-to-day lives of the villagers, and were also privy to “village gossips”. As a result, they were able “to get as comprehensive a picture as possible of the role of women” (p. 4). This has made the ethnographic account presented in the book more lively and extremely interesting. *Forging New Paths* is a book highly recommended for social scientists specializing in gender issues and rural development.

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